

LENA C. TAYLOR

Wisconsin State Senator • 4th District

HERE TO SERVE YOU!

Committee on Ethics Reform & Government Operations

Testimony of Senator Lena C Taylor

SB 215 – Juneteenth Day!

February 14th, 2008

Chairman Risser, Distinguished Committee Members, Ladies & Gentlemen, my name is Madu Enwemnw, Legislative Aide to Senator Lena Taylor. The Senator could not be present today to personally deliver this testimony. She however asked that it be read on her behalf to show her unequivocal support for this critical, timely and well intentioned legislation.

As we may all know by now, Juneteenth, or the “19th of June”, commemorates the day when slaves in the last geographic area in America where slavery existed learned of their freedom. The emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Abraham Lincoln on September 22, 1862, and issued on January 1, 1863. It took more than two and a half years for the news to travel to southwest Texas. We can blame the lack of technological innovations for the delay in transmission of that piece of information!

So what is our collective excuse or reason for waiting until 1997, for the U.S. Congress to recognize and proclaim the “Juneteenth Independence Day”? For that matter, why did it take another ten years for the House of Representatives to pass concurrent legislation urging President Bush to establish Juneteenth Independence Day as a National Holiday Observance in America? We may never find satisfactory answers to these troubling questions. What we can do though is take expedient action to ensure that our country’s mantra: that every American has equal rights, dignity, and unparalleled value is engrained in the minds of our children and future generations. I reiterate that this piece of legislation is timely.

One hundred forty three years later, as we grapple with ways to recognize the many contributions of African Americans to our culture, we in Wisconsin should seize this opportunity to help shape our country’s character and enhance her diversity. In this state that we love dearly, African Americans have been instrumental to its vitality, success and prosperity. Juneteenth should therefore be seen as a day that stands for the dignity and equality of all citizens, regardless of race, such that all may share the bountiful blessings of freedom that America provides. Juneteenth is America’s 2nd Independence Day!

I especially appreciate the efforts of Senator Coggs, Representative Grigsby and everyone else who worked diligently to shepherd SB 215 to this point. Our campaign has passed the halfway mark and exceeded expectations. Permit me to be presumptuous in saying then, that I am a proud Wisconsinite and enjoin all the other states in the Union in officially recognizing this important celebration of the end of slavery.

The old adage: "None are free until all are free", is so fitting and germane. I pray that we all see the day that Juneteenth Day becomes a legal holiday in Wisconsin and a national Holiday in America. Thank you for your time.